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Illinois Democracy Schools: Preparing Students for College, Career, *and* Civic Life

Shawn Healy

Robert R. McCormick Foundation

Introduction

The original purpose of public schools in the United States was to prepare young people for their role as citizens in a representative democracy.

Thomas Jefferson, in a 1787 letter to James Madison, wrote: “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.” As the torch was passed from Jefferson to Horace Mann to John Dewey, the belief in the transformational potential of our schools to prepare young people for their roles as citizens in a democracy burned brightly.

However, the contemporary policy landscape privileges career- and college-readiness, pursued through a national obsession with standardized tests in reading and math. The historic civic mission of schools has been buried by a narrowed curriculum and rigid test preparation, with deleterious consequences for our democracy. These problems are particularly pronounced in Illinois.

In the pages that follow, I will chart the current policy terrain as it relates to civic learning, with a specific focus on Illinois. In spite of this unfavorable environment, there is movement both nationally and in Illinois to reverse course and embrace high-quality, school-based civic learning. I will detail a framework established by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, and operationalized by the Democracy Schools Initiative in Illinois, to deepen school-wide commitments to civic learning. This framework, and the Illinois Democracy Schools that embrace it, constitute worthy models for replication in a transformed policy landscape.

An Unfavorable Policy Terrain

Currently, forty state constitutions mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens, and thirteen of them state the central purpose of the educational system is to promote good citizenship, democracy, and free government (Carnegie, 5). During the intervening years, schools have been tasked with ensuring that their students are career- and college-ready, but unfortunately in too many locales their original civic mission has been all but abandoned (Wagner, 2008).

Hess (2011) writes, “As schooling has become more economically central, the stuff of citizenship has become increasingly peripheral. When we do design to speak of citizenship today, it is increasingly in transactional and practical terms—with citizenship understood as a basket of skills (how to shake hands, speak properly, be punctual) that will help students attend prestigious colleges and obtain desirable jobs” (xii).

School-based civic education is thus in indisputable decline. While a single-semester government course is a staple of most high school curricula (Illinois excepted), three required civics



courses were the norm two generations ago. Besides a government course focusing on institutions (three branches of government, how a bill becomes a law, etc.), students enrolled in a separate course addressing the rights and responsibilities of citizens, along with a course that addressed contemporary issues, often titled “Problems of Democracy” (Carnegie, 5, 14).

The slow abandonment of a curricular commitment to civic learning was accelerated by the renewal and revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act a decade ago. Relabeled “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), the legislation focused primarily on demonstrable gains in student achievement and strict accountability for states and schools. The principal measurement vehicle was standardized tests in reading and math. Since its inception, NCLB has narrowed the curriculum, marginalizing the social studies, civics included, and other subjects that collectively constitute a “well-rounded” education. For example, in a 2008 study the Center for Education Policy (McMurrer, 2008) found that 53% of districts surveyed cut back on social studies instructional time by at least 75 minutes per week.

Given the apparent permanence of NCLB’s dictates, some suggest that civics join the testing fray, adding a mandatory civics exam, or use civics as a means of preparing students for standardized tests (Levine, 154). Because these tests do not measure students’ civic skills and dispositions particularly well, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools has pushed for alternative forms of assessment like group projects and portfolio assessments (Annenberg Foundation, 2011). Tennessee became the first state to mandate civics portfolio assessments at the middle and high school levels in 2012 (Tennessee Center for Civic Learning and Engagement).

In the wake of NCLB, student performance on civic learning assessments has subsequently stagnated and in some cases regressed. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics within the federal Department of Education, is a continuous, representative assessment of student knowledge and skills in select subject areas, civics included. Scores are relatively flat over the last three iterations of the civics assessment (1998, 2006, and 2010), where less than a quarter of middle and high school students performed at or above proficiency level in the subject. Moreover, fewer than five percent of graduating seniors leave high school with advanced proficiency in civics, including the ability to list two privileges of U.S. citizens, explain the impact of television on the political process, or summarize the views of Roosevelt and Reagan on the role of government (National Center for Education Statistics).

The problem is particularly acute in Illinois. Compared to other states in the country, Illinois has some of the weakest civic learning requirements for high school students. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (Godsay et al, 2012), every state, Illinois included, addresses civics and government in its social studies standards. However, Illinois is one of only 10 states that do not require a standalone course in civics or government. Moreover, Illinois is not among the 21 states that test social studies in standardized fashion, or the eight that test specifically in civics or government.



The Illinois School Code does require instruction in “patriotism and principles of representative government,” including the Flag Code, Pledge of Allegiance, and voting methodologies (Illinois General Assembly). Most often, these requirements are addressed within the context of an American history course and assessed through the infamous “Constitution Test.” Civic learning, as mandated by the state, thus equates to little more than window dressing and leaves Illinois high school graduates ill-prepared to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

According to the *2012 Illinois Civic Health Index* (2013, McCormick Foundation and the National Conference on Citizenship), Illinois Millennials (ages 18-29) fare poorly when compared to their national peers on several measures of civic engagement. Fewer than three-in-ten vote regularly in local elections (29.8% in Illinois compared to 34.9% nationally), ranking 47th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Illinois Millennials rarely speak to (29%, 45th) or receive favors from (7.2%, 42nd) neighbors, or work with them to resolve a community problem (2.2%, 48th).

The Civic Mission of Schools

Acknowledging that the vast majority of students remain in public schools, it is no wonder then that young people demonstrate low levels of civic knowledge and lack proclivities toward political participation. Schools must continue to ensure the career and college-readiness of their students, but also prepare them for the vital rigors of democratic citizenship.

In 2003, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Center for Information Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) published *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS) report. The report references the common interest in rekindling youth civic engagement, and considers schools the pivotal player (8). It states, “Schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country.”

The general principles of the recommended approaches in the CMS report hold common an intentional focus on civic outcomes, not mere educational gains; a focus on political and civic engagement, while avoiding the promotion of an individual position or political party; the elevation of active learning with real world connections; and an emphasis on the ideas and principles embedded in the founding documents and their influence on societal institutions, including schools (21).

The CMS report articulated six promising approaches (dubbed “proven practices” in the 2011 update, *Guardian of Democracy* (Annenberg)) for citizenship development in schools. They include formal instruction in U.S. government, history, law, and democracy; structured engagement with current and controversial issues; service learning linked to the formal curriculum; extracurricular activities that encourage greater involvement and connection to school and the community; authentic student voice in school governance; and finally, participation in simulations of democratic structures and processes (22-28).



In the sections that follow, I will detail these promising approaches, highlighting relevant research to date proving their impact.

Formal Instruction in U.S. Government, History, Law and Democracy

The *Civic Mission in Schools* report reads, “if you teach them, they will learn,” arguing this is the “lesson of modern research on civic education” (22). Specifically, this means that social studies courses should make explicit connections between formal instruction and concrete actions; include material not contained in the text book and visits from people in the community; reflect key democratic knowledge, skills, and concepts; and utilize a range of instruction and assessment tools.

Relevant course themes include the Constitution and its fundamental principles as applied to the past and present; the structure of government over time; the powers and limitations of branches of government at the federal, state, and local levels; the relationship between government and other sectors; the relationship between the United States and other nations and to world affairs; major themes in United States history; and the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Niemi and Junn (1998) cemented the importance of formal instruction in the political socialization process. However, they lamented the tendency toward dry, textbook approaches to civics, with little topical variety from grade-to-grade, and a weak link between what students study and what they know (73-75). They write, “What the teacher brings to the classroom by the way of methods and material—in ways that are understandable and theoretically plausible—seems to be an important factor in what students take away from their classes” (81). Simply stated, “What takes place in the civics curriculum—the amount, content, and approach—makes a difference” (90).

Teaching with Current and Controversial Political and Social Issues

The second promising approach centers on discussion of current issues relevant to young people’s lives. Such discussions are not new to the civic education scene. They were mainstays in the aforementioned and now extinct “problems of democracy” courses common to the 20th Century social studies curriculum (Hess, 2009a). The *Civic Mission of Schools* report claims that these approaches yield greater student interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills, more civic knowledge, greater interest in discussing public affairs outside of school, and a higher probability of voting and volunteering as adults (24).

Indicators of quality classroom engagement with current and controversial issues include exploring issues that address meaningful and timely questions about public problems, and deserve both students’ and the public’s attention. Teachers should select learning materials that provide students with necessary background information, present the best arguments on varying sides of an issue, and engage students with multiple and complex perspectives. Teachers should also utilize a range of discussion models to explicitly teach students skills to participate in discussion, and



develop ground rules to ensure that inclusive and productive discussions occur in a climate of respect and civility.

Students should understand an issue or event well enough to form their own opinions. Schools and teachers must offer a rationale for addressing controversial issues, including how instruction meets civic and curricular goals. Finally, discussions should be undertaken with regard to the ethical dilemmas involved in teaching about controversial issues, including the degree to which teachers disclose their own thoughts and opinions on these issues.

Education researcher Diana Hess' 2009 book *Controversy in the Classroom* makes a powerful case for structured engagement with current and controversial issues. She writes, "the purposeful inclusion of controversial political issues in the school curriculum...illustrates a core component of a functioning democratic community, while building the understandings, skills, and dispositions that young people need to live in and improve such a community" (5). Schools, Hess contends, are ideal sites for students to encounter controversial political issues because they complement the curriculum, are in the presence of trained teachers who have or can develop expertise in fostering deliberation or inquiry, and the classroom setting presents rich ideological diversity among students (6).

Service Learning Linked to the Formal Curriculum and Classroom Instruction

The third promising approach embedded within the *Civic Mission of Schools* report centers on service learning. Service learning has an intentional focus on civic outcomes, encourages civic commitment, and increases students' knowledge of the community. It is used intentionally as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.

Service learning projects should have sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes. Service activities should be meaningful and personally relevant for participants, and these experiences should incorporate multiple, challenging reflection activities that are ongoing, and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society. Service activities should promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants, be collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

Service learning projects should engage participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and use results for improvement and sustainability. Students must have a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

Spote and Kahne (2007) found that in-class learning experiences and service learning opportunities were the strongest predictors of students' civic commitments in a longitudinal study of Chicago Public Schools high school freshmen and juniors (1, 8-10).

Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) reported that students who participate in service learning programs show higher civic knowledge and dispositions, a greater tendency to value school, and an



increased likelihood to vote as adults (26, 53). There exists wide variation among service learning programs, and the practices of individual teachers (active teaching strategies, for example) in this domain is deemed critical (5, 54).

Extracurricular Activities that Encourage Greater Involvement and Connection to School and Community

The fourth promising approach highlighted in the *Civic Mission of Schools* report centers on extracurricular activities. These opportunities should provide a forum in which students can use skills and knowledge in purposeful experiences that have both meaning and context. In a similar sense, these activities can help students develop a sense of agency as a member of one's community, as they claim membership in a socially recognized and valued group.

These activities also develop support networks of peers and adults that can help in both present and future, and foster teamwork and collaboration. Students who participate in these activities are provided opportunities to engage in challenging tasks that promote learning of valued skills, and to develop and confirm positive social identity. Students should voluntarily select these activities because they are genuinely interested in them, and the activities themselves should be structured, adult-led, intensive, and long-term.

Kirlin (2003) examined the relationship between extracurricular activities during adolescence and political participation as adults via scholarship published to date. She discovered a strong correlation between the two, particularly for instrumental organizations ("those with a collective goal beyond individual participation") like student government, school newspapers, or yearbook, and not for expressive organizations such as sports or drama (13, 15).

Thomas and McFarland (2010) conducted a deeper investigation of the links between voluntary participation in extracurricular activities as students and voting as adults. They found that extracurriculars, even those without an overt political focus, are powerful vehicles of political socialization. They contribute to one's sense of being able to make a difference, create influential relationships, and may change the political motivations of adolescents, helping them realize that they have a stake in the political world (6-7).

Student Voice in School Governance

Student participation in school governance stands as the fifth promising approach detailed by the *Civic Mission in Schools* report. While students learn about their roles as citizens in a democracy in the classroom and through extracurricular activities, it is important that they have opportunities to practice it in the school community. Examples include holding deliberative meetings to discuss school issues, reserving blocs of time for intensive, collaborative projects, student representation on administrative committees and/ or the school board, and the creation of a school constitution (27-28).



Student voice in school governance should transcend social planning. Schools should provide opportunities that stimulate and engage large numbers of students in school and community service activities, and to discuss school policies, present their viewpoints and positions, and be heard respectfully. Along these lines, schools must establish mechanisms and processes to gauge and respond to student voices, and provide students with opportunities to work with others (peers, parents, teachers, etc.) to address school problems.

Students should be informed of their rights and responsibilities in school, have roles in resolving tensions and issues at school, and their decisions must have real impact. Overall, programs aimed at student voice should facilitate school-wide democratic deliberation as a way of fostering students' civic skills and dispositions.

Research is admittedly sparse in this domain, though McIntosh and Younsis (2010) recently waded into these waters. They lamented the dearth of evidence demonstrating a link between engaging the entire student body in democratic deliberation and student civic development (3). Specifically, they studied the civic engagement initiative at Hudson (MA) High School, which included student clustering and school-wide governance. Through this program, students discuss and vote on school governance issues in cluster meetings reminiscent of New England town hall meetings of old. Cluster recommendations are sent for a monthly vote among the community council composed of students, faculty, administration, and members of the community (4).

Their findings were mixed. The clusters were not as successful as anticipated, for they were perhaps too large and there were arguably a dearth of substantive issues over which to deliberate (9). The community council, however, appeared to be working well in process and product (11). Moreover, the researchers found interest groups emerging out of the clusters, where discussions of governance issues occurred (13).

Flanagan et al (2010) offer normative justification for schools empowering their student bodies. They write, "While instruction is important in advancing the civic mission of schools, knowledge alone cannot promote civic interest, action, and commitment. Students also need opportunities to work together, to voice their views, and to hear those of fellow students."

Schools are thus "public spaces" with an informal curriculum critical to a healthy democratic culture. They hypothesize that schools which build a sense of solidarity and group identification help establish young people's trust in one another. As a member of a community of learners, students are more willing to act in the common good if they are connected with one another and trust their teachers. Moreover, such school environs are perceived by parents as trustworthy and safe (308-311).

Participation in Simulations of Democratic Structures and Processes

The sixth and final promising approach to citizen development articulated in the *Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS) report recommends participation in simulations of democratic processes



and procedures. Characteristics of simulations include students practicing citizenship through role-playing, acting in fictional environments in ways not yet possible in the “real world,” and learning important civic content and skills along the way.

Simulations require advanced academic skills and constructive interaction with other students under challenging circumstances, and include applicability to both civic and non-civic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic. They also provide the opportunity for a greater time investment and deeper learning, and often incorporate technology as a powerful tool for teaching students about democratic processes.

Louis Ganzler (2010) did an intensive study of the Legislative Semester simulation of United States government at Community High School in West Chicago, Illinois. He claims that school-based simulations are characterized by meaningful roles for all students, “architecture for controversy,” and a shift of responsibility for facilitating discussion from teacher to student (53).

His analysis of student results revealed that comfort with conflict as a result of the simulation experience was associated with political engagement, and provides further evidence of the need to provide students with opportunities to discuss controversial issues in a controlled classroom setting (125). Along these lines, Ganzler found that students were dramatically more confident in speaking before their peers, and also felt that their classroom environments were open for discussion (137).

Guardian of Democracy

In the aftermath of the publication of the *Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS) report, a coalition known as the “Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools” emerged. The Campaign is composed of forty organizations “committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools.” To date, the Campaign has focused on implementing the recommendations of the CMS report at the local, state and national levels. Since 2004, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, an affiliate of the National Campaign, has led these efforts statewide. In the interest of full disclosure, my employer, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, convenes the Illinois Coalition, and I serve as chair.

The promising approaches of the CMS report were reinforced in *Guardian of Democracy* (Annenberg Foundation), a 2011 report that echoes its predecessor, but presents updated research. *Guardian of Democracy* makes a profound case for the benefits of school-based civic learning, including development of the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective participation in civic life.

Civic knowledge encompasses an understanding of our structures of government, along with the related processes of legislating and policy making. Civic skills are integral to democratic participation and include deliberation, information gathering and processing, community organizing, and other forms of collaboration. Civic dispositions invoke duty-based norms of



participation, tolerance, concern for the rights and welfare of others, and institutional trust. Collectively, civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions lead to various forms of democratic participation, including voting, volunteering, communication with elected and appointed officials, and demonstrations (16-17).

The benefits of high-quality, school-based civic learning transcend strengthened civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Channeling the pioneering work of Harvard Education Professor Meira Levinson (2007, 2010, and 2012), *Guardian of Democracy* makes a compelling argument for civic equity, imploring educators to tackle a civic achievement gap that fails to empower students of color and lower socioeconomic status, leading to participatory inequalities and related disparities in public policy outcomes.

Like Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld (2009), *Guardian of Democracy* suggests that a combination of traditional and student-centered classroom-based civic learning opportunities build competencies like creativity, critical thinking, economic knowledge, global awareness, media literacy, and working collaboratively with peers. These competencies are transferable to the 21st Century work place.

High-quality, school-based civic learning also leads to improved school climate by teaching the importance of community, respectful dialogue, teamwork, and diversity. Finally, experiential civic learning opportunities like service learning and simulations, linked to the “real world,” are among the most promising means of lowering the nation’s drop-out epidemic (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

Continuous School Improvement and Five Essential School Supports

Since their inception, American schools “have always been the battleground for shaping society” (Reese, ix). “Schools cannot fix most of the (societal) problems they did not create, but, if historical precedent matters, that will not stop people from asking them to try” (332).

John Goodlad (2004) suggested that if schools were suddenly closed in this country, they would need to be dramatically reinvented. The schools we need, he argued, are not necessarily the ones we’ve had, and current critiques lack constructive suggestions for reform (2).

NCLB became law more than a decade ago, and concretized the school reform movement, for better or for worse. It ushered in an era of high-stakes testing in reading and math, with strict accountability measures for schools across student demographic groups. In hindsight, the thresholds for student proficiency were set impossibly high, and the Obama Administration has issued waivers to states who implement their own reforms in line with federal dictates. The Act itself has expired, but Congress continues to appropriate funds, and the Administration used federal stimulus money to further a reform agenda centered on high-stakes testing, teacher evaluation, and school choice.

NCLB and the current school reform movement have its critics, perhaps most notably Diane Ravitch, an architect of the law and agenda who later did an about-face in reaction to



empirical evidence questioning their effectiveness (Ravitch, 2010). TheodoreSizer (2004) has long promoted an alternative agenda through his Coalition of Essential Schools argues, “Imposing standards, testing, and privatizing on a dysfunctional system of schools is not reform, in the core meaning of that word” (114).

Academic achievement is only one measure of school quality, and even it is calculated quite narrowly in the current environment (Goodlad, 61). A parallel reform movement has thus taken hold in select states, districts, and schools nationwide. While student achievement remains central to aims, it shuns “teaching to the test,” and engages the entire school as unit for improvement.

Echoing, Goodlad, Smylie (2010) suggests that “schools must change in fundamental ways in order to perform effectively in the future . . . thus the call for schools to take on the organizational properties and adopt the processes of school improvement” (2). The opposite of a one-time, abrupt shift, continuous school improvement is regular and ongoing, oriented towards incremental change, intentional and strategic, and both proactive and reactive. It focuses on the entire school and engages all members in the process, and is mission and values focused (26).

The evidence of the continuous improvement processes on organizational improvement and performance is robust, but most existing research focuses on organizations other than schools (41). There is no one single model or path towards continuous improvement, but in the context of a school setting, the process emphasizes student achievement plus “the development of particular aspects of school organization conducive to organizational effectiveness in general and to effective teaching and learning in particular” (68).

Stated differently, Fullan (2007) writes, “Reform is not just putting in place the latest policy. It means changing the cultures of classrooms, schools, districts, universities, and so on” (7).

Goodlad articulates this challenge in greater detail:

Schools are more different, it seems, in the somewhat elusive qualities making up their ambience—the ways students and teachers relate to one another, the school’s orientation to academic concerns, the degree to which students are caught up in peer-group interests other than academic, the way principals and teachers regard one another, the degree of autonomy possessed by principals and teachers in conducting their work, the nature of the relationship between the school and its parent clientele (247).

Bryk et al (2010) deduced “a comprehensive, empirically grounded theory of practice” from a sample of Chicago elementary schools during a reform period that took root in the late 1980s and continued throughout the next decade (11). Student achievement in reading and math as measured on standardized tests was their dependent variable, but they find a mere measure of the percentage of students performing at national norms in a given school an insufficient indicator. Instead, they argue, school performance should be measured from a value-added perspective, essentially how much students are learning at a given school and their improvement over time (32).



Mirroring the suggestions of Fullan and Goodlad, Bryk et al articulated a framework of five essential supports for student learning. First, school leadership is positioned as a driver for change, with “principals as catalytic agents for systematic improvement” (45).

Second, high performing schools boast strong parent-community ties. “Through active outreach efforts, staff members seek to make the school a more hospitable and welcoming environment for parents and strengthen the connections to other local institutions concerned with the care and well-being of children and their families” (46).

Third, the professional capacity of staff is critical for student achievement. High-performing schools have a “deliberate focus on the quality of new staff.” They also “strengthen . . . the process supporting faculty learning and promot[e] a continuous improvement ethos across a school-based professional community.”

Fourth, student achievement is dependent on a learning climate “where [they] feel safe and are pressed to engage [and succeed] in more ambitious intellectual activity.” Fifth and finally, schools must establish supports for curriculum and instruction “in order to promote more ambitious academic achievement for every child.”

According to Bryk et al (2010), each facet of the essential supports framework is connected and interacts reciprocally (65). While continuous school improvement must begin in a single area, in order to be sustained, it must address each of the essential supports (65-67). Based on their study of CPS elementary schools, gains in student engagement and learning were most likely in schools showing strength in one or more of the five support areas.

Unfortunately, the converse was also true (88). Schools who demonstrated strength across the indicators were ten times more likely to show improvement than those were weak in one or more areas. A low score on a single indicator reduces the likelihood of improvement to less than ten percent (95).

The descriptions of continuous school improvement and essential supports for student learning have thus far been devoid of a civic dimension. Enter the 2010 *No Excuses* report of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, with the following subtitle: *Eleven Schools and Districts That Make Preparing Citizens for Citizenship a Priority*. As suggested by the title, the Campaign visited eleven American high schools known nationally for their commitment to civic learning. They vary by region, location (urban/suburban/rural), and enrollment, and two are located in suburban Chicago (see below for further details).

Like Smylie (2010), the Campaign, in search of best practices, suggests that a linear approach is not necessary to institutionalize civic learning (8). However, among these exemplars, civic learning was often referenced in schools’ mission and vision statements (10). Moreover, mirroring Bryk et al’s (2010) professional capacity dimensions, teachers “enjoyed autonomy, responsibility, and leeway to introduce thought-provoking, appropriate civic topics in the classroom” (11).



Significant collaboration also occurred among teachers at these exemplar schools, and they set aside time for reflection and ability to make changes to civic practices (15). District administrators also played a vital role. Instead of standing passively to the side, administrators from the schools studied “were instrumental in leveraging policies, resources, and political capital to create opportunities for students’ civic growth” (11). This, too, aligns with Bryk et al’s contention that leadership is the driver of school change.

The schools’ curriculum addressed civics in a spiraling fashion throughout students’ four years of high school. Civic learning practices and programs were often developed “organically,” yet supplemented by resources from outside organizations including Facing History and Ourselves, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, and the Center for Civic Education (12-13).

A reciprocal relationship existed in each case between the school and the community transcending the school-parent relationship described by Bryk et al. Exemplar schools relied on standardized processes to make sure stakeholders are imbedded in the school culture. For example, some cities have experimented with youth commissions as a means of promoting civic engagement in a systematic and strategic fashion (Siriani and Schor, 121). The Campaign found that these partnerships work best when schools have a staff member dedicated to community relationships (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 16-17).

Finally, a student-centered learning climate also played a significant role in the civic culture of these exemplary schools. Most displayed their mission statement and student work reflective of students’ civic engagement. Also, principals and teachers interacted positively with students and are candid about their own civic experiences. In short, they served as civic role models. These commitments to civic norms and values transcended specific staff members, and reciprocally, students showed a sense of responsibility and efficacy (18).

Illinois Democracy Schools

In an effort to advance the civic preparedness of Illinois youth, the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition launched the Democracy Schools Initiative (DSI) in 2005. The DSI invites high schools to demonstrate commitment to their civic mission by completing a school-wide civic assessment and charting future plans for developing and sustaining high quality civic learning. The DSI framework is inspired by Bryk et al’s five essential supports model as operationalized in the *No Excuses* report. In fact, two of the schools profiled within, Maine West High School and West Chicago Community High School, are current Illinois Democracy Schools.

By definition, Democracy Schools embrace their mission to provide high quality civic learning opportunities for all students. While powerful curriculum and proven civic learning practices woven throughout the formal curriculum are critical, they alone are insufficient. School leadership must emphasize civic learning through development of professional faculty and staff capacity. School administration, faculty, and staff must foster a school climate that nurtures and models civic dispositions and build reciprocal relationships within the surrounding community.



Prospective Democracy Schools begin by forming a team of faculty members and administrators to plan and administer a school-wide civic assessment, appraising the status of the combined *Civic Mission of Schools* and *No Excuses* indicators detailed in the previous sections. By assessing and aligning their current practices with these frameworks, teams propose ways to deepen their school's commitment to civic learning and strive for recognition as an Illinois Democracy School.

School teams who satisfactorily complete the civic assessment and develop a strategic plan for future school-wide civic learning commitments are eligible for funding to strengthen proficiencies in identified areas. Since 2006, seventeen Illinois high schools completed the DSI assessment and application process and received recognition through the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition (ICMC) as Democracy Schools.

In addition to supplementary funding, recognized Democracy Schools receive a framed certificate signed by representatives of all three branches of state government, a banner for public display at school, each of which are presented at a public recognition ceremony at a school assembly or board meeting. Beginning in the fall of 2013, Democracy School recognition can be listed in the awards section of the revised school report cards.

In order to sustain and continue to support the gains that each of the existing Democracy Schools have made since completing the application process, last year the Coalition formalized a network of representatives from each of these schools. Network members share best practices in civic learning during quarterly meetings and through an online communication channel. They also continue to develop their knowledge and skills of civic content and proven civic learning practices, and serve as a source of mentoring for prospective Democracy Schools.

The Coalition has engaged in preliminary evaluation on the impact of the Democracy Schools application process on recognized Illinois Democracy Schools. Several themes emerged from the survey data. The most prominent incentives and motivations for pursuing Democracy Schools recognition were reinvigorating schools civic learning programs, related funding for pursuit of improvement plans, and recognition itself. It seems clear that a major benefit is the galvanizing effect the process has, at least during the time devoted to the processes of assessment, application and recognition. There is an increased desire, even demand, to find ways to further develop school-wide awareness and participation.

Moving forward, the Coalition seeks to accomplish three objectives through the Democracy Schools Initiative. First, the seventeen current Illinois Democracy Schools are concentrated in suburban Chicago. The Coalition is committed to statewide representation, and has made significant inroads in the past couple of years in engaging with high schools in both Southern Illinois and Chicago Public Schools on the Democracy Schools assessment and application processes.

Second, the Coalition seeks a collective mix of Illinois Democracy Schools whose student bodies are representative of statewide demographics, including race/ethnicity, income, and English



proficiency. Existing Democracy Schools have fewer students of color and limited English proficiency, and their students are more affluent than statewide averages.

Third and finally, while gaining Democracy School recognition and institutionalizing school-wide commitments to civic learning are important ends in themselves, they are also a means to advocate for more supportive state and local policies. At this moment, Illinois Democracy Schools remain the exception in embracing their civic mission despite fierce headwinds. Looking forward, they stand as models for statewide replication, facilitated by a more favorable policy landscape.

Conclusion

Schools are under enormous pressure to raise student achievement on standardized tests, incorporate new national Common Core standards in math and English and language arts, and prepare an ever-diverse student population for post-secondary education, and ultimately careers. Living their historic mission to prepare young people for their roles as citizens in our democracy need not be a mutually exclusive option. By incorporating best practices in civic learning throughout the formal curriculum, within extracurricular opportunities, and in school governance, as exemplified by Illinois Democracy Schools, schools can ensure that students graduate high school college-, career-, and civic-ready.

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